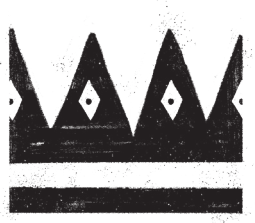
FLOURISH
BIBLE STUDY

ESTHER

LEADER'S GUIDE



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INTRODUCTION: GETTING INTO ESTHER

Ideally, you'll cover the introduction at your initial gathering, setting the stage for the entire study. You can focus discussion on the characters in Esther and primary themes to watch out for. Also talk about the place of Esther in the big-picture storyline of the Bible. Emphasize how and why God's people had come to live in Persia, far away from their homeland, centered in the city of Jerusalem. You'll want to note that while God isn't mentioned even once in Esther, he underlies everything that happens in the book.

WEEK 1: A KING'S FEAST

ESTHER 1:1–22

A conversation about feasting will get the group talking. Why do we like lavish banquets? Feasts are an important part of Esther. You'll notice as you work through the book that feasts are typically held when something significant is about to happen or has happened. In other words, feasts are markers in the story. Plan to spend some time on question 6 looking at other biblical feasts and what they point to. Feasting is a powerful image of the gospel and life in Christ because we all not only need food but delight in lavish outpourings of it. All physical feasting is designed to awaken us to the greater delight of—and need for—spiritual feasting. Before you dive into the study itself, remind the group that God's people, due to longstanding, unrepentant sin, are far away from the blessed life under God's king, which he had always intended for them. Exposing the character of King Ahasuerus points to the need for a better king, one who cares about his people and does all he can to serve and protect them rather than manipulate and use them. And, of course, King Jesus is the only king who has ever lived up to those high kingly standards.

1. PORTRAIT OF A KING

- What is revealed about the king in the following verses?

  Answer: vv. 3–4: He has reigned over a vast empire for three years and sought allegiances with princes by hosting a feast; vv 7–8: A man of excess; vv. 10–11: he is a show-off who uses his queen as a personal pawn; v. 12: He is embarrassed and humiliated by his wife's refusal to comply with his demand; vv. 19–21: to save face, the king banishes the queen, basically cutting off his nose to spite his face. Summary: King Ahasuerus is brash, arrogant, petty, irrational, and hedonistic.

2. FEASTS FIT FOR A KING

- From what we've observed about King Ahasuerus so far, what might have motivated him to be so generous toward his subjects and to bend this banqueting rule?

  Answer: He wants to look good in the eyes of everyone, low and high, and he is likely seeking to gain the allegiance of his subjects.

3. NO PLACE FOR A QUEEN

- The author tells us that the king summoned Queen Vashti when his heart "was merry with wine" (v. 10). How do the following passages from the Bible's wisdom literature help us understand from this detail something more about King Ahasuerus's character?

  Answer: *Prov. 31:4–5*: Unlike King Ahasuerus, a righteous king won't risk altering his judgment by drinking.

  Eccles. 10:17: The king doesn't use wine for the joyful purposes God intended but to gratify his insatiable gluttony and manipulate people.

- Based on what we've seen of King Ahasuerus thus far, why do you think Vashti's refusal enraged him?

  Answer: He craves public adoration and admiration, and her refusal not only denies him these things but makes him look weak before all those whose admiration he seeks.

4. THE KING'S DILEMMA

- We are told in verse 14 that the wise men were seated beside the king so that they "saw the king's face." What does this indicate about what guided the wise men as they advised the king?

  Answer: They want to shape their answers based on what they believe he wants to hear, which they expect will show in his facial expressions.

- One of these wise men was named Memucan. What concerns does he express in verses 16–18 and what claim does he make? Why do you think his claim would have a powerful impact on the king?

  Answer: He fears loss of control in his kingdom, especially shameful if it a woman is the root cause. Everyone would know that while he inspires fear in many places, he is powerless over his own wife.

- Memucan suggests that the king issue a royal order barring Queen Vashti from the king's presence for all time (v. 19). Such orders, once recorded in Persian law books, could never be repealed. Memucan's suggestion pleases King Ahasuerus, and he issues the order, commanding that the decree be published far and wide throughout his vast kingdom. What anticipated response to the decree pleased the king and the princes (vv. 20–21)?

  Answer: All women will give honor to their husbands, which will, in turn, enhance the honor given to the king.

5. HAIL TO THE KING

- How is this promised king a stark contrast to King Ahasuerus?

  Answer: *Isa. 32*: The promised king seeks his people's good, rules with justice, wisdom, protection, and provision.

  Jer. 23: Rules justly and wisely for his people's benefit.

  Zech. 9: Reigns with both power and humility.

- Read Psalm 2, a song God's people sang back home in Israel. What is promised in this psalm? How might this psalm have helped the Jews living under Persian rule?

  Answer: The Lord is King of kings and one day, all worldly powers will bow to his authority.

6. THE VERY BEST BANQUET

- What do you see in the invitations below that make them so superior to the feasts of King Ahasuerus?

  Answer: *Prov. 9*: Guests are invited to a life-giving feast of wisdom.

  Isa. 55: The Lord's provisions are offered freely and bring life to all who partake.

  John 7: The King himself is the feast that never ends.

- Ultimately, all the banquet invitations in the Bible point to the ultimate invitation—the marriage supper of the Lamb—which is the be-all-end-all feast that believers will one day eat with the Lord in glory. What can we look forward to there?

  Answer: *Isa. 25*: Complete satisfaction, all things made right, eternal life.

  Rev. 19: Celebration with the King of kings forever and all God's promises completely fulfilled.

WEEK 2: AN UNLIKELY QUEEN

ESTHER 2:1–23

This week we meet Mordecai and Esther, and from this time forward, the story centers primarily on what they do. Discuss the realities of life in the Persian harem. Ask how these realities debunk the sanitized view many of them were taught in Sunday school. The primary point to bring out is that these realities show how God accomplishes his purposes through sinful people in a fallen world and that he is always at work even when sin and decadence seem dominant. As you work through Esther 2, be sure to note all the various ways God's hidden hand is at work directing people and circumstances and encounters for his intended purposes.

1. A KING WITHOUT A QUEEN (2:1–4)

- We're told that King Ahasuerus "remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her" (v. 1). Based on the guidance supplied by the young advisors in verse 2, what sort of "remembering" was the king most likely doing?

  Answer: The king seems to second-guess his rash decision to send away his queen, and he misses having a consort.

- Identify each of the four steps suggested by the advisors in verses 2–4.

  Answer: (1) Locate all the beautiful women in the kingdom and bring them to the royal dwelling. (2) Appoint officers to bring them to the harem. (3) Provide them beauty treatments. (4) Choose from among them a new queen.

2. MORDECAI AND ESTHER (2:5–11)

- Because of Esther's beauty, she was among the young women who were gathered up and taken to the king's harem, where she was treated better than many of the young women. Why, according to verse 9, was she treated so well?

  Answer: Because she was compliant, she pleased the eunuch, Hegai, who oversaw the harem.

- Why did Esther hold back her Jewish identity? What does this secrecy likely indicate about the place of God's people, the Jews, in Persian society at the time?

  Answer: She kept her Jewish identity secret at the direction of Mordecai, which hints at underlying antisemitism in Persia.

3. THE REALITY OF HAREM LIFE (2:12–14)

- Esther won Hegai's favor and was rewarded with personal attendants, tasty food, and superior accommodations, and her days were spent luxuriating in baths and learning the arts of seduction—all while keeping her Jewish identity a secret. The author passes no judgment on Esther or her life within the harem. In fact, as we will see, the author never addresses the morality of anything Esther does. How can this serve as a guide to our own thinking about Esther?

  Answer: We are not meant to see Esther as the hero of the story. God is the hero, and he works providentially through people and situations to accomplish his purposes.

4. ESTHER'S NIGHT (2:15–16)

- We are told that Esther, while in the harem, "was winning favor" in the eyes of all who saw her (v. 15) and later that she "won grace and favor" in the king's sight. The favor shown Esther was something she won. Based on what we've seen of Esther so far, how did she go about winning favor? (You might want to take another look at verses 10 and 15.)

  Answer: She won favor by complying with the directions of the authorites over her, whether her guardian Mordecai or the head of the harem, Hegai.

- As you consider how the story has unfolded so far, how can you trace God's hand at work behind the scenes, guiding the steps of Esther's life? Note where you can discern the hand of God working.

  Answer: God works providentially through the king's sin and weaknesses, the queen's refusal to be a pawn, the advisors' counsel, the protective care of Mordecai, and the favor of Hegai to bring Esther from obscurity to a place of influence and prominence.

- How do Proverbs 16:1, 9 and 21:1 reinforce your understanding of God's work in this story?

  Answer: God is in control and sovereignly directs everything that happens in this world.

5. IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME (2:19–23)

- The scene opens on Mordecai, who is sitting in the king's gate. We mustn't think he was people watching from the comfort of a lounge chair; he was, in fact, quite busy. Gate sitters in those days were the movers and shakers and decision makers. They

solved community problems and decided civil matters and legal cases. What does Mordecai's position at the gate indicate about his place in Persian society?

Answer: Mordecai holds a position of authority in the community, likely as a result of Esther's new position, and is therefore well-regarded.

- What do we learn about Esther—now Queen Esther—in verse 20? What does this convey about Mordecai's place in her life, even though she is now King Ahasuerus's queen?

Answer: She still gives him the respect owed to this fatherly figure and obeys his instructions.

- How did the plot against the king originate?

Answer: Two eunuchs, who had close proximity to the king and therefore the inner workings of his administration, were angered at something he did or decided, and they plotted to have him assassinated.

- Where do you see the providential hand of God at work in this scene of political intrigue (vv. 19–23)? Consider the various people and the events they set in motion.

Answer: The two eunuchs happened to discuss their plot near Mordecai, who overheard. Because of his close tie to Queen Esther, he was able to warn the king, and the plot of thwarted.

WEEK 3: AN EVIL MAN AND AN EVIL PLAN

ESTHER 3:1–15

One purpose of this study is to see how the events in Esther tie into the overarching storyline of the whole Bible. Chapter 3 is ideal to for this, as we meet the wicked Haman, who determines to wipe out God's people. It's important to look back in Scripture and trace the thread of Haman's ancestors—the Amalekites and the Amalekite king Agag—because this helps us see how all of Scripture is tied together. Tracing this particular story shows us that God keeps his promises and works them out over time—often long periods of time. Also important to cover this week is Haman's casting of lots because this act, which seems random but is actually controlled by God, is the basis for the Feast of Purim, the last and most important feast in the book.

1. A LOOK BACK (3:1–2)

- Read Exodus 17:8–16, which describes a time when the Amalekites tried to destroy God's people. What does God decree concerning the Amalekites in Exodus 17:14–16?

  Answer: God vowed to blot out Amalek and foretold that the Amalekites would be at ongoing war with him.

- God fulfills some of his decrees slowly, over time, and this explains why the Amalekites were still on the scene and stirring up trouble centuries later during the days of Israel's first king, Saul. To deal with these troublemakers, the Lord commanded Saul to carry out that long-ago decree from back in Exodus. Saul was to destroy the Amalekites, which included Haman's infamous ancestor King Agag. Read 1 Samuel 15:1–33. How did King Saul fail to carry out the Lord's command? What ultimately happened to King Agag?

  Answer: Saul disobeyed the Lord's instructions to kill Agag, merely capturing him instead. Samuel fulfilled God's command and hacked Agag to death.

2. PRIDE AND PREJUDICE (3:3–6)

- How does Haman initially react when he finds out that Mordecai refuses to honor him? Where else in this story have we seen a similar reaction? Can you identify similarities in these instances as to what provoked this particular emotion?

  Answer: Haman is enraged by Mordecai's refusal. Like the king he serves, Haman's pride is severely wounded at being publicly disrespected. His craving for honor leads to an extreme response (much like the king in chapter 1).

- How does verse 6 show the full extent of Haman's hatred? To whom does it extend?

  Answer: The incident exposes Haman's hatred toward Jews.

3. IT'S ALL IN THE TIMING (3:7–11)

- Haman begins with an appeal to King Ahasuerus (vv. 8–9). How does he portray God's people, the Jews, in his appeal?

  Answer: He portrays the Jews as disobedient to the king and the laws of Persia.

- How does Haman appeal to King Ahasuerus's self-interest?

  Answer: *v. 8*: He says that Jewish opposition would hinder the growth of the king's empire.

  v. 9: He comes up with a scheme that will wipe out all the Jews while making the king richer.

- The Persians weren't the only ancient society to practice casting lots. It was customary even in Israel when God's guidance was needed. Read Proverbs 16:33. What light does that proverb cast on what's happening here in Persia?

  Answer: Casting was common practice in the ancient Near East, including among God's people. Although there is no mysterious power in the lots, God works through this practice to bring about his plans.

- King Ahasuerus gives Haman his signet ring, indicating his approval of Haman's plot. Haman now has unlimited power to do as he wishes. To possess the king's signet ring was to possess the authority of the king himself. What fact about Haman's background is repeated in verse 10, and what is it meant to emphasize?

  Answer: Haman is identified as an Agagite, a descendant of King Agag of the Amalekites, which is intended to highlight that he's an enemy of God's people, yet another fulfillment of God's words in Exodus about ongoing war between the Amalekites and Israel.

4. HAMAN'S EVIL EDICT (3:12–15)

- Describe the spread of Haman's edict. Who received it, and how far did it reach?

  Answer: The edict spread throughout the entire Persian Empire. Everyone was made aware of it.

- What was used to signify the authority behind the edict?

  Answer: The edict was written under the king's authority and sealed with his signet ring. And then letters about the edict were sent throughout Persia, in every language, so everyone would know of it.

- What specific instructions were included in the letters that accompanied the edict?

  Answer: The Jews were to be utterly wiped out and all their goods confiscated.

- Esther 3 ends with a contrast. Identify the contrast and what it conveys about:

  Answer: The contrast is the difference in response between the king and Haman, who celebrated with another feast, and the Persian people, who are greatly unsettled. That the king and Haman could celebrate shows their callous disregard for human life and their greed. That the people are confused indicates that they didn't share the same attitude toward the Jews.

WEEK 4: SUCH A TIME AS THIS

ESTHER 4:1–17

This chapter gives us the most well-known verse in Esther, the one where Mordecai challenges Esther to step up and risk everything for her people: "For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4:14). In preparation for the challenge, Esther fasts. Take some time to discuss fasting in Scripture and the mourning that so often accompanies it. In what ways is such fasting spiritually beneficial? You might discuss when and how those in your group have fasted and what resulted from it. Be sure also to cover section 3 in your discussion about how God keeps his promises and that this is the basis for Mordecai's confidence.

1. MORDECAI EXPOSED (4:1–3)

- Mordecai has gone from hiding his Jewish identity (Esther 2), to admitting it to his colleagues at the city gates (Esther 3), to what we see here in Esther 4. What further risk does Mordecai take in verse 2?

  Answer: He mourns publicly about the edict against the Jews, and he dares to go to the king's gate wearing mourning clothes.

- Up until now, God's people have fared quite well in Persia. We remember that some had returned to Jerusalem, their homeland, but many had not. We aren't told why, but it could be that a return to Jerusalem meant leaving behind Persian comforts and participating in the difficult task of rebuilding all that had been destroyed years before. For that reason, perhaps it was just easier to stay put. After all, some likely reasoned, they'd had little trouble living as Jews among the Persians. But overnight all that changed. How do the Jews respond to the edict?

  Answer: They mirror Mordecai in their expressions of public mourning.

- In those days people not only wept and fasted to show grief but also tore their clothes and covered themselves in ashes. Certainly Haman's evil plan was cause for great sorrow, but the outpouring of emotion here likely involved more than just tears and torn clothes. In the chart below, note what prompted other occasions of God's people mourning and what happened as a result.

  Answer: Draw answers directly from the chart passages. Perhaps look at one or two in your group rather than try to cover all of them, or simply summarize what you learn from the chart. Mourning for sin and its consequences turned people's hearts back to the Lord.

- What insights do we get from these passages that shed light on the mourning going on in Susa?

  Answer: Their immersion in Persian culture made them forget the Lord. The edict calling for their annihilation reminds them of who they are—the Lord's people—and that the Lord is a faithful king and ruler, where Ahasueras is not.

2. ESTHER'S DILEMMA (4:4–11)

- What distresses Esther, and what does she do about it in verse 4?

  Answer: She is distressed when she learns of the edict and sends clothes to Mordecai, likely to get him out of his sackcloth for his own protection.

- Esther's concern deepens when Mordecai refuses her attempt to help him. She calls for one of her attendants, Hathach, and orders him to go outside and find out why Mordecai is so upset. Mordecai brings Hathach up to speed and sends him back to Esther with a command. What does Mordecai want Esther to do?

  Answer: Mordecai urges Esther to go the king and plead for the lives of the Jews.

- Hathach is stuck in the middle! He relays to Esther all that Mordecai told him to say—the great dilemma facing God's people—but Esther sends Hathach right back to Mordecai with a dilemma of her own. What is Esther's dilemma, and why does she have reason for concern?

  Answer: The law of the land stated that anyone approached the king without prior permission would be put to death unless the king decided in the moment to allow the visitor to speak with him. Esther considers Mordecai's request risky in light of the fact that the king hadn't sought her company for thirty days.

3. GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES (4:12–14)

- The first point in Mordecai's final appeal is meant to open Esther's eyes to a particular reality (v. 13). What is it?

  Answer: She herself is a Jew!

- What confidence does Mordecai express in verse 14?

  Answer: Mordecai trusts the the Lord will deliver the Jews one way or another.

- The author of our story doesn't tell us the reason for Mordecai's confidence, but the very fact that he is confident indicates that life in Persia hasn't made him forget the promises of God. What promises do you see in the passages below? To whom were the promises made, and who receives the blessings promised?

Answer: Ask group members to share a passage that stood out to them.

- Taken together, how do those passages in the chart above provide the reason for Mordecai's confidence?

  Answer: The Lord always keeps his promises.

- Mordecai was confident of God's deliverance, but he didn't know how it would play out. Read Galatians 1:3–4 and Colossians 1:13. How do these passages show us how Mordecai's confident words were ultimately fufilled?

  Answer: All of God's deliverances pointed forward to the full and final and ultimate deliverer, Jesus Christ. Mordecai's confidence here foreshadows the Savior to come.

- Mordecai ends his final appeal to Esther with a question, something for her to ponder as she weighs the risks before her (vv. 13–14). What does Mordecai want her to realize about herself and, most likely, about God?

  Answer: God is the one who has placed her in the position she holds to accomplish his good purposes—the deliverance of his people (vv. 3–4).

4. ESTHER'S CHOICE (4:15–17)

- To prepare to approach the king, Esther decides to fast. Who does she include in the fast, and what does her initiative indicate about her allegiances?

  Answer: Esther includes all the Jews in Persia to fast alongside her, indicating that she has aligned herself with them.

- Esther is clear-headed and utterly realistic about the risk she is taking. What does she say that lets us know this?

  Answer: She is determined to go forward to help the Jews, even at peril to her own life.

- We noted earlier that Mordecai was confident of deliverance because God had promised long ago to preserve his people forever. Mordecai didn't have the full picture of how God would keep his promise, but we do: God kept it through Jesus. Like Esther, Jesus was willing to die to save God's people, but he did way more than Esther ever could have done. Read Jesus's words in John 12:27–28. What specifically in this last section of Esther 4 foreshadows Jesus's words here in John?

  Answer: Jesus doesn't ask to be delivered from what he has come to do—sacrifice his very life for the sake of God's people. Esther's willingness to die to save the Jews foreshadows Jesus's willingness to go to the cross.

WEEK 5: RISE AND FALL

ESTHER 5:1–14

We see significant growth in Esther this week. You might want to discuss the ways she has changed and all that has led up to these changes. In sharp contrast to Esther is Haman. Point out how the author of the story portrays Haman and reflect on how this deepens our understanding of what happens to people who oppose God.

1. IN THE PRESENCE OF ROYALTY (5:1–5)

- Why do you think Esther chose to wear her royal robes to go see the king?

  Answer: As a reminder to the king that she is his queen.

- What does King Ahasuerus offer Esther?

  Answer: He offers to give her a significant portion of his kingdom, indicating she has won his favor.

- What does Esther say to the king?

  Answer: She invites the king along with Haman to a feast later that day. As we have seen, the king loves to feast!

2. ESTHER'S FIRST FEAST (5:6–8)

- How does Esther's response to the king in verses 7–8 differ from her earlier response in verse 4? Note the differences you see.

  Answer: She makes a bigger appeal for his favor and promises she will bear her soul to him the next day, if he will allow her to make another feast.

3. PORTRAIT OF A FOOL (5:9–14)

- What changes Haman's mood so suddenly and how does it change?

  Answer: Haman encounters Mordecai, who refuses to acknowledge him, and this completely destroys Haman's jubilant mood.

- Mordecai really gets under Haman's skin. We're told that Haman "restrained himself and went home" (v. 10). What does he do once he gets home?

  Answer: He gathers his loyal friends and family to rebuild his damaged ego.

- What does Haman tell his friends and family in verses 12–13, and what does this reveal about Haman's heart, about what matters most to him?

Answer: He's delighted to be included in Esther's feast, but Mordecai's refusal to honor him steals this joy. What seems to matter most to Haman is crushing out Mordecai because Mordecai won't give him the honor he craves.

- What insights do we get about Haman from the following proverbs?

  Answer: *Prov. 14:29*: He was a fool, exposed by his quick temper.

  Prov. 29:10: Haman's wicked heart and desire to harm others was the root of his hatred for Mordecai.

  Prov. 29:11: Haman has no discretion but vents his anger/emotions with no self-control.

- What do we learn in this section about Haman's wife, Zeresh?

  Answer: She encourages Haman in his evil.

- Summarize how the hidden hand of God works through the people in this chapter to move the story forward. Note which of these people initiate and which ones are passive responders.

  Answer: *Esther*: Initiator. God works through her to influence the king and to expose Haman.

  King Ahasuerus: Passive Responder. God works to shape his thoughts, which will shpe the plans going forward.

  Haman: Initiator. God works through Haman's ego to both attend the feasts and to inact a plot against Mordecai.

  Zeresh: Initiator. God works through her wicked encouragement of evil to get the plot against Mordecai going.

WEEK 6: HAMAN'S VERY BAD DAY

ESTHER 6:1–14

There's so much to see this week about the providence of God, how his hand is always at work in the smallest details of our lives. Be sure to emphasize this in your discussion! Haman's conversation with his wife Zeresh helps us see that the events unfolding in Susa are no doubt impacting the Persians' view of God's people and, by extension, of God himself. You might want to talk about what this says about God's purposes, how his care for his own people is designed to attract outsiders to come be part of his people as well.

1. ONE SLEEPLESS NIGHT (6:1–3)

- How does each of the following passages deepen our understanding of how God works in the seemingly random details of life—not just kings' lives but ours too?

  Answer: *Ps. 139:15–16*: God has planned our days even before we were conceived.

  Prov. 16:1: What we determine to do is so often different from what we end up doing, by the providential hand of God.

  Prov. 16:9: God overrules our plans for his own good purposes.

  Prov. 21:1: Even earthly powers and their decisions are overruled by God's plans.

  Acts 17:24–25: God directs the steps of our lives—even where we live—to cause us to see our need of him.

  Rom. 11:36: Everything that happens comes from God, through God, and is ultimately for his glory.

  Col. 1:16: God rules everything and everyone.

- Rather than toss and turn the night away, the king did what many of us do on sleepless nights—he decided to read. Specifically, the king asked for "the book of memorable deeds," in which were recorded all the important happenings in Persia. The book was a log of people and places, payments and gifts. What does King Ahasuerus discover as he reads?

  Answer: He discovers that Mordecai once saved his life by exposing a murderous plot against him. He realizes Mordecai's service was never rewarded.

2. RISE AND FALL (6:4–11)

- Where do you see God's providence guiding the events that unfold in this scene?

  Answer: These random happenings are all providentially guided by God's hand: the discovery of Mordecai's past heroism, the need to reward it, encountering Haman to supply the reward to the very one he hates so much.

- In what way is Haman's view of himself skewed? How is this reflected in his description of how a civic hero should be honored (vv. 7–9)?

  Answer: He thinks he is worthy of the reward he outlines, on par with the king himself.

- Why would Haman view the king's order in verse 10 as just about the worst thing he could think of?

  Answer: Haman wants to annihilate Mordecai, and now he is told to honor him publicly as if Mordecai were royalty.

3. NO WAY OUT (6:12–14)

- In this section we see Haman quickly on the move, but the pace of his life had already begun to change, even in the last chapter. Note in each case, below, what caused Haman to hurry.

  Answer: *5:4–5*: Haman is quickly summoned to the feast.

  6:10: Haman is ordered to hurry to honor Mordecai.

  6:12: Haman hurries home.

  6:14: The eunuchs hurry to get Haman to the second feast.

- What impression do you think the author of Esther is trying to make here?

  Answer: That when it's God's timing, nothing will stand in the way. Also, that Haman is not in control of his own life.

- What, according to Haman's people, not only will likely happen but is already happening?

  Answer: Mordecai and his people will be saved, and the one who plotted to destroy them—Haman—will be the loser.

- How is Haman's approach to the king's court at the end of Esther 6 (v. 14) different from his approach at the beginning (v. 4)?

  Answer: In verse 4, Haman enters freely into the king's court to arrange for Mordecai's death. In verse 14, he is brought by others into the king's presence.

WEEK 7: EXPOSURE!

ESTHER 7:1–10

Be sure to allow significant time to cover section 2 this week, which helps us understand from other places in Scripture what God is doing in and through all that's happening in Esther. Ask your group which of the passages in this section—Deuteronomy 3:39; Job 42:1–2, Psalm 75:6–7; Daniel 2:20–22; or Romans 13:1—they found most illuminating in this regard. Be sure to talk about how Haman's "lifting up" on the gallows calmed King Ahasuerus's anger and how this foreshadows the lifting up of Christ on the cross, satisfying God's wrath against the sin of his people. It would be good to emphasize the difference between the lifting up of Haman and that of Jesus, which is covered in the last portion of section 2.

1. THE TRUTH REVEALED (7:1–6)

- Esther begins to pour out her heart in verse 3. What qualifications does she mention in her response to the king, and what does she ask for?

  Answer: She reminds him that he has given her favor and has promised to grant her a wish, and that wish is for her life and the lives of her people, whose identity she hasn't yet revealed.

- What does Esther begin to expose in verse 3?

  Answer: Her "people"—she is setting the stage to show her alignment with the Jews.

- Review Esther's carefully chosen words in verses 3–4 and summarize the various ways she appeals to the king's self-interest?

  Answer: She flatters the king with his great worth, valuing him above herself and all others.

- It is evident in the king's outraged response to Esther's appeal that he has known very little about Haman's edict against the Jews. The king had simply rubber-stamped the edict when his trusted advisor had pitched it to him, because it seemed in his own best interests to give the go-ahead. But as to those who would actually be affected by it, well, he hadn't bothered to investigate. And even here, in verse 5, he again doesn't ask for details. Why, then, is the king so outraged?

  Answer: His ego is wounded, that he's been deceived.

2. WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND (7:7–10)

- What does King Ahasuerus see when he comes in from the palace garden, and how does he interpret it?

  Answer: The king sees Haman pleading with Esther, but he misinterprets Haman's actions as a sexual assault.

- Haman's face is quickly covered, symbolizing that he stands condemned, and immediately after, Harbona the eunuch speaks to the king. What does Harbona suggest, and how does he speak about Mordecai?

  Answer: Harbona reminds the king of Mordecai's heroism and suggests that Haman meet his fate on the very gallows intended for Mordecai.

- Harbona has a favored place in the king's court, being one of the eunuchs who serves in the king's presence. This is the second time Harbona has appeared in our story. He was in attendance at the feast that King Ahasuerus hosted for the citizens of Susa

and was among those commanded to fetch Queen Vashti when the king wanted to show her off. Given his position so near to the king, Harbona surely knew a good bit about Persian affairs of state and about the king himself. As we consider his advice to the king here and the way he phrased it, what can we surmise about his view of the situation and the people involved—a view likely shared by others close to the king?

Answer: Harbona and the entire administration likely knew that Haman was out to better himself and used the king (and anyone else he could) for that purpose. It seems there is no hesitation about suggesting Haman's death, and thus his removal from the administration.

- What finally calms the king's anger?

Answer: Once Haman was hanged, the king is calmed. As group leader, you might want to point out that this foreshadows the cross, when God's just wrath against sinners was removed. Unlike Haman, who was judged justly for his sin, Jesus died for our sins, not his own. The correlation here isn't Haman's death pointing to Jesus, but the calming of the king's anger, which points to the satisfaction of God's wrath.

- What light do the following passages shed on God's presence in the book of Esther up to this point in the story?

Answer: *Deut. 32:39*: God is the Lord of life and death.

Job 42:1–2: No human being can thwart God's set plans and purposes.

Ps. 75:6–7: God always does what is right.

Dan. 2:20–22: The timings of every single thing is determined by God for his glory.

Rom. 13:1: All earthly authorities and powers are under the authority and power of God.

- Despite Esther's powerful plea and Haman's demise in this chapter, the evil plot he'd set in motion lingers. What danger still hangs over God's people?

Answer: The edict against the Jewish people in Persia is still in force.

WEEK 8: A GREAT REVERSAL

ESTHER 8:1–17

Reversals—that's the big focus this week. Take time to identify the reversals now showing up in the story. It's fun to find them all, and most of all, it shows us the amazing power of God. In your discussion, be sure also to touch on the new edict and why it's such cause for rejoicing, and then this leads naturally into the first "Let's Talk" point at the end of the lesson.

1. TAKING DOWN AND SETTING UP (8:1–2)

- What brings Mordecai to the king?

  Answer: Esther finally reveals her relationship to Mordecai.

- Note below the reversals that occur in these opening verses.

  Answer: *v. 1*: Haman's property becomes Esther's property.

  v. 2: Mordecai is given the coveted position with the king that Haman used to hold.

2. A NEW DAY AND A NEW WAY (8:3–8)

- In what way is Esther's appeal to the king different here from her initial appeal in 5:1– 4?

  Answer: Esther's first approach was deferential and controlled. In this plea, she is emotional and pleading, all while continuing to praise him. She admits her heritage instead of concealing it, is more honest (and not purposely vague, as she was in chapter 5), and clear in her desire and plan.

- What does Esther ask the king to do, and on what conditions does she base her appeal (v. 5)?

  Answer: She requests that the edict be repealed, and she bases her plea on the king's favor or mercy.

- Still bound by the earlier edict crafted by Haman, the king nevertheless seeks to please his queen. What solution does he propose?

  Answer: He allows Esther to compose another decree that would make the first decree difficult or impossible to carry out.

3. KING AHASUERUS'S CLEVER SOLUTION (8:9–14)

- King Ahasuerus summons his scribes and assigns the drafting of the new edict to his newly installed chief advisor, Mordecai. In the box below, underline the similarities you see in the preparation of Mordecai's edict here and the preparation of Haman's from Esther 3. Then use the empty column to note the differences in the two accounts?

  Answer: Refer to chart for discussion.

- How would you summarize the gist of the new edict?

  Answer: The new edict provides the king's backing for the Jews to defend themselves however they have to against attacks.

4. JOY AND GLADNESS (8:15–17)

- How is Mordecai presented to us here?

  Answer: Prior to this, Mordecai was last seen in a physical state of lament. In a reversal, he is now in a position of honor, clothed in garments of joy instead of grief.

- What words does the author use to describe the mood among God's people throughout the land of Persia?

  Answer: Light, gladness, joy, honor.

- How did the Jews celebrate this momentous occasion?

  Answer: They held a feast to celebrate.

- How did Persian citizens respond to the new edict?

  Answer: They were afraid of the newfound power/status of the Jews, and many Persians went over to their "side."

- Identify the reversals in the passages below?

  Answer: *3:15 reversed in 8:15*: Mordecai, not Haman, is now esteemed.

  4:1 reversed in 8:15: Mordecai's mourning clothes are now clothes of honor.

  4:3 reversed in 8:16–17: The Jews mourning has become celebrating.

WEEK 9: DELIVERANCE

ESTHER 9:1–19

You might want to begin this week by reading the first verse of Esther 9, which summarizes the entire story: "The Jews gained mastery over those who hated them." Be sure to point to Jesus here, how he, as the ultimate Jew, gained mastery over sin, Satan, and death through his death and resurrection—the ultimate reversal! Also touch on how verse 1 carries forward God's ancient edict to destroy the Amalekites, those old enemies of his people. Talk also about holy wars and why Christians don't participate in those wars today. The wiping out of enemies in Old Testament times was God's purging out evil people who could entice or destroy the people he was establishing under his rule and authority. Even so—even in destruction—God's aim has always been redemptive. When sin and evil fail and are destroyed, people are warned and invited to avoid the same fate. That's why, today, Christians seek to "conquer" unbelievers with the gospel.

1. POWER SHIFT (9:1–5)

- Last week we focused on the reversals in the book of Esther; so many of them occur in chapter 8! But what does this first verse of chapter 9 pinpoint as the overarching reversal of the entire story?

  Answer: The Jews triumphed over those who'd sought to destroy them.

- Why, according to verse 2, were the enemies of the Jews unable to prevail?

  Answer: They were afraid of the Jews.

- Strengthening the Jews were all the Persian officials who came to help them. Why, according to verses 3–4, did these leaders side with the Jews?

  Answer: They were afraid of Mordecai in his new position of power.

- We are told that the Jews "struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them" (v. 5). According to the edict authored by Mordecai (see 8:11), what were the terms under which the Jews could engage in such killing?

  Answer: They could kill in self-defense and take all the belongings of those who sought to harm them.

2. A BLOODY DAY (9:6–10)

- Years and years after God made that promise but long before Esther's time, you might recall that God commanded Israel's King Saul to destroy the Amalekites in battle.

Review what happened that day in 1 Samuel 15:1–23. Based on what you read there, how is the Jews' refusal to take plunder here another reversal?

Answer: Israel's King Saul was told not to take the Amalekite plunder but to destroy it, but he kept it anyway. The reason for the command was complete separation from anything and anyone opposed to God. The reversal here is that the Jews were told they could take it, but they did not. The Jews' refusal to take enemy plunder indicates they wanted no affiliation with God's enemies.

3. ESTHER'S WISHES (9:11–15)

- In times past, the king's generosity was offered to Esther in response to her pleas. Here, he initiates. What does this seem to indicate about Esther's place in the king's life and court?

  Answer: The king's esteem of her must have risen in that all she initiated for him has proven to be a benefit to him.

- What two wishes does Esther present to King Ahasuerus?

  Answer: She asks one more day for the Jews to kill in self-defense, and she asks that Haman's sons be executed. This too was a fulfillment of God's promise back in Exodus that the Amalekites would be wiped out.

- What happens with Esther's wishes?

  Answer: They are carried out.

- Describe this change from what you see in the passages below.

  Answer: *Matt. 28:18–20*: God's people push back evil by sharing the gospel, and sinners are "conquered" by it.

  Eph. 6:10–18: God's people push back the evil aligned against them with the weapons of faith.

4. TIME TO CELEBRATE (9:16–19)

- We recall that the edicts—both Haman's and Mordecai's—went into effect on Adar 13. And both of these edicts were valid for just that one day. But then Esther re- quested another edict to carry out a second day of battle within the city of Susa. Sort through the dates and events in verses 16–19 and complete the chart below, filling in what happened on these specific days?

  Answer: The two open spaces on the chart should be filled in with "rest and celebration."

- What characterizes the celebration here in chapter 9?

  Answer: Gladness and gift-giving.

WEEK 10: A FEAST FOR ALL TIME

ESTHER 9:20–10:3

You'll definitely want to talk about the Feast of Purim this week. Your group might wonder about the significance of this feast, why it's important enough to serve as the underlying reason for an entire book of the Bible. It might seem kind of irrelevant to the storyline of the Bible, but it is most definitely not, because it's really a feast about the all-powerful sovereignty of God and how his purposes will always be accomplished. Be sure to leave sufficient time to cover section 4, how the passages listed there enhance or fulfill the big-picture Bible themes revealed in Esther.

1. A CALL TO CELEBRATE (9:20–23)

- Both Adar 14 and Adar 15, the original days of celebration, were to become a national Jewish holiday spread over those same two days every year. According to Mordecai's instructions, what particular reversals were to be commemorated each year?

  Answer: The Jews had destroyed those who'd been determined to destroy them, and their mourning had become gladness.

- What activities were to occur during the annual celebration?

  Answer: They were to feast, exchange gifts, and give to the poor.

2. THE LOT WAS CAST (9:24–28)

- What reminder is provided here in this passage about how Haman had determined the day for attacking the Jews?

  Answer: He had cast lots. "Pur" means to cast lots, and Haman used this method to determine the date of the Jews's destruction. The reversal is signaled in the name "Purim."

- We know that Haman's evil plot failed, and in verse 25 we are reminded that circumstances changed so that Haman's evil plan "should return on his own head." What does Psalm 7:12–16 add to our understanding of this wording here in verse 25 and of God's role in Haman's tragic end?

  Answer: The psalm shows how God works to turn evil back on itself.

- What do the *therefores* in verse 26 tell us? The same ques- tion applies for whichever Bible translation you are using, where some of you have "so that" or "because of" or "that is why": what *reason* or *condition* is being revealed?

  Answer: The feast would be commemorated annually as a remembrance of what God had done to save them from their enemies.

- It's hard to think of God's people establishing a joyful feast to commemorate the death and destruction of anyone, even long-feared enemies. How does Psalm 16:5–6 help explain the joy associated with this occasion?

  Answer: They are celebrating not the death of people but that the Lord protects and provides for his people and determines their destiny.

- What commitment do the Jews make concerning the Feast of Purim?

  Answer: They commit to an annual celebration on the same days each year and to pass down the reason for the feast to each generation.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF PURIM (9:23–32)

- This is the last we hear of Esther. What do you observe about Esther's position in Persia at this point? What words clue you in?

  Answer: Esther is fully and publicly connected with Mordecai, and she has authority, much power, and position. She is able to "obligate" citizens to keep the feast, and decrees are now carried out at her "command."

- All God's people in Persia obligated themselves to keep this joyful feast each year, just as they kept more somber occasions that involved not joy but fasting and lament (see, for example, Leviticus 16:29–31). This final section of Esther 9 (vv. 29–32) begins and ends with the same action. What is it, and why do you think this is recorded for us?

  Answer: The feast and its purpose are written down. The writing would preserve the reason for Purim for all time, so that even today God's people know that God is faithful to save his own.

4. THE GREATNESS OF MORDECAI (10:1–3)

- Why was Mordecai a popular leader?

  Answer: The Jews remained safe and the people prospered.

- How do the passages below enhance or fulfill the big-picture Bible themes we've studied in Esther as well as what we have learned about the character of God? Some of the themes to look for include God's faithfulness and providence, his justice, and his power to deliver his people. It's also really fun to uncover his powerful reversals.

Answer: *Luke 4:16–19*: The deliverance of the Jews in Persia foreshadows Jesus's rescue of sinners.

John 10:27–30: No one can take the Lord's people away from him.

Rom. 8:28–30: No power set against God's people will prosper, because the Lord overrules everything for the good of those who belong to him.

Eph. 1:11–12: Everything that happens is God's will, and he works it for the saving of his people, for the praise of his glory. This praise echos the celebration in Susa.

Col. 1:16–20: Every power and authority is raised up to accomplish God's purposes, and he is able to reconcile situations and people to his purposes so that the whole world will praise him.

Rev. 19:6–9: The Feast of Purim foreshadows the marriage supper of the Lamb, when Christ will gather his bride, the church, to feast joyfully with him forever.